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CAUSES OF THE VIETNAM WAR: AN ACADEMIC LOOK  
AT WILSONIASM AND COLD WAR EFFECTS

by

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## *Preface*

Growing up during the Vietnam War, I was surprised when the North Vietnamese communist were able to ultimately win the war against the South. I had always assumed that every war that the United States fought in had to be a victory for us. Another assumption I had was that any American military involvement in a foreign conflict had to be in defense of traditional liberal notions (freedom, liberty, justice, etc...). As I peeled back the layers of history of the Vietnam War, I was surprised to learn that faulty political decisions made by top American leadership in an effort to stem the flow of communism, eventually lead to a situation in which U.S. military forces were unable to achieve national strategy.

This research was made possible with the guidance and assistance of my research advisor, LCDR McBayer. Help also came from the staff of the Air University library, and associates from Auburn University library. Professors from the Political Science Department of Auburn University at Montgomery provided lectures and discussions on causes of the Cold War and anti-Communist policies of the United States. On-line, the best web site for general historical information proved to be the CNN/Cold War web page.

### *Abstract*

At the end of World War II Europe was divided by two ideological super powers. President Truman had hoped that newly conquered Eastern Europe would hold free elections and determine their own course of government. Stalin had no intention of releasing his grip on the lands, and an "Iron Curtain" descended on Europe. Woodrow Wilson's dream of a general association (league) of nations was formed in the way of the United Nations, but this organization could do little to stop communist expansionism. Wilson, in earlier years, had believed it was the role of the United States to promote democracy and freedom throughout the world. Modern day democracy has its base in Christianity and classical liberal thought. Both clash against socialism and communism. Leaders of the West, such as Truman, saw the Soviet Union through Wilsonianism eyes. They were convinced that democracy was morally superior to other forms of government and saw communism as a threat against idealist dreams of world harmony. This lead American politics to embrace the idealist notion of promoting and defending liberal democracy worldwide. Communism was seen as the opposite of democracy, and therefore a threat to international peace and world stability. What Wilson (and later Kennedy and Johnson) failed to recognize is that western ideas of individualism, liberalism, constitutionalism, equality, liberty, the rule of law, democracy, free markets, separation of church and state, often have little resonance in Confucian, Buddhist, or Orthodox cultures.

## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction**

The communist containment policy, created at the start of the cold war, combined with elements of Wilsonianism, is the primary cause of the U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War. At the end of World War II Europe was divided by two ideological super powers. President Truman had hoped that newly conquered Eastern Europe would hold free elections and determine their own course of government, but his hopes were dashed by the Marshall Plan and Stalin's resistance to open his markets. Communist ideology was fundamentally opposed to capitalism, and the United States was unwillingly make concessions to the Soviet totalitarian government. Stalin had no intention of releasing his grip on the lands, and an "Iron Curtain" descended on Europe. The National Security document (NSC-68) produced in April 1950, which served as the United States' primary document on cold war strategy, defined the national interests in terms of moral principles. America was cast as a crusader set out on a moral mission to produce an international environment in which free markets and democracy could flourish. This meant stopping the spread of communist ideology. Woodrow Wilson's dream of a general association (league) of nations was formed in the way of the United Nations, but this organization could do little to stop communist expansionism. Wilson, in earlier years, had believed it was the role of the United States to promote democracy and freedom throughout the

world. Modern day democracy has its base in Christianity and classical liberal thought. Both clash against socialism and communism. Leaders of the West, such as Truman, saw the Soviet Union through Wilsonian eyes. They were convinced that democracy was morally superior to other forms of government and saw communism as a threat against idealist dreams of world harmony.

Some past U.S. presidents are remembered for their foreign policy achievements, but Woodrow Wilson is remembered for shaping American thought. He understood what drove the American psyche; principally that we see ourselves as being unique. We perceive our role in this world as a nation responsible for the propagation of freedom and democracy. In Wilson's First State of the Union Address, on December 2, 1913, he outlined what would later be called Wilsonianism. He explained that international laws, states' trustworthiness, and treaties were the building blocks of international order. Wilson was convinced that binding arbitration, not force, was the best method for resolving international disputes.<sup>1</sup> Wilson later refined his foreign policy to include the following three characteristics; (1) people are by nature peace loving ... democracies derive their powers from the people ... therefore, foreign policies of democracies are morally superior, (2) unlike most other nations that practice diplomacy for selfish nationalistic reasons, the United States has a responsibility to promote liberty and peace in the world, and (3) the state should have the same moral and ethical standards as the individual. Wilson was the first president to talk of the United States as the world's policeman; responsible for ensuring the well being of humankind. In 1915 he put forth a doctrine that placed this country in the position of opposing aggression everywhere. When the United States entered World War I it wasn't to defend foreign national interest

or ensure the balance of power. Rather it had to do with fighting for the rights and liberties of the peoples in Europe.

### **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> Henry Kissinger, *Diplomacy*, (New York: Touchstone, 1994, p808-823).



## **Chapter 2**

### **Causes of the Cold War**

The origin of the Cold War can best be described as a misperception between actors. The Soviet Union had a history of being invaded by the west from the Napoleonic Wars to World War II. They had legitimate concerns of the security of their national boundaries in Eastern Europe. In the late 1940's the United States did not fully recognize Stalin's realistic state security concerns. Also, the Soviets did not share western idealistic views on free markets and collective security of Western Europe, or at the least, they didn't perceive these concerns as outweighing their own legitimate state security needs. Through this misperception by both sides, each acted in defense of the other. Because each had an opposing ideological view of the other, this misperception was exaggerated. There are three theories why the Cold War started <sup>1</sup>.

The first theory of why the Cold War started is based on the behavior of the primary actors involved, the Soviet Union and the United States. Even though during WWII Russia was an ally with the U.S., President Roosevelt was anti-Russian, and saw the communist system as a threat to democracy. The Soviets were aggressive in nature and wanted to expand their communist influence over Europe. Stalin believed he had the right to control any land he occupied. The United States saw Soviet expansionism as a threat not just to Europe, but to the rest of the free world. The result was an American

foreign policy for containment expansion, which later became increasingly militant. This theory was first developed during the late 1940s, and George Kennan first coined the term “containment” in his X-Paper.

Later the revisionists offered a different view. The revisionist portrayed the United States as the aggressor, and capitalism as trying to eliminate socialism and communist ideology. Both views had much in common, but each was from opposing sides. Each side saw the other as trying to expand their influence over other nations. This expansion posed a threat to each other’s national security. The Cold War was a result of the United States and the Soviet Union acting in defense from each other. Depending on your view, one was the aggressor and the other the defender<sup>2</sup>.

The post-revisionist theory takes a look at the international political system in Europe prior to World War II. The seeds of the Cold War can be found in ideological differences between socialism and capitalism. Lenin believed the basis of all true relationships was communist collectivism. Western liberal thought supported the need for free markets, open elections, right to own property, and individual rights. Following WWII, there was a bipolar system with democracy to the west and communism to the east. They were two great powers facing off against each other ... creating a bi-polar split. It was as if they were destined to be adversaries<sup>3</sup>. Many times in history wars have been fought over the balance of power in Europe. The Cold War can be looked at as having similar underlying causes that lead to the Napoleonic Wars or both World Wars. The political split between the east and the west in the late 1940’s did exist, and it was the characteristics of the main actors that brought both the United States and the Soviet Union (and Europe) into the Cold War.

Prior to the beginning of WWII, Stalin wanted to make a pact with Western powers (France and England) in an effort to contain Adolph Hitler. In 1938 Hitler took Austria. Earlier Nazi advocates had talked of the need to make more room for the German race. Both the Austrian invasion and Nazi expansionism threatened Russia to the East. Stalin at this time wanted to take an allied stand with Britain and France against Nazi Fascism. Also in 1938, Germany denounced the government of Czechoslovakia for supporting communist Bolsheviks in central Europe, and oppressing Germans living there. When representatives from France and England met with Hitler in Munich to discuss the Czech situation, the Soviets were not present (or invited). The eventual invasion of all of Czechoslovakia, created a greater threat for Russia. This lead Stalin to believe that he had to deal with Hitler on his own, without support from the West. Later Russia did become an ally in fighting Germany, but they were still treated differently by the United States than our Western allies. At the end of WWII the U.S. immediately stopped supplying Russia under the Lend-Lease agreement, and even reloaded ships in Russian ports that had just been down loaded. This is in contrast to the way we handled the Lend-Lease agreement in England. In England the U.S. continued the shipping of American equipment well after the end of the war.

Some say President Roosevelt at the end of World War II had an Universalist's view of world order. After all he was a member of Wilson's subcabinet and in 1920, as a candidate for Vice President he campaigned for the League of Nations. The universalistic views all nations having a common interest in world peace, and that the national security could be guaranteed by the international organization.<sup>4</sup> Stalin did not share this view. The Kremlin thought only of "spheres of interest", and that the security

of a nation would be assured only if the state's interests were acknowledged by others. Stalin came to Yalta looking for an early agreement on Central Europe. Roosevelt thought that maintaining that "Old World" thinking of looking out for your own state's interest, such as the Soviets was doing, might someday lead to another confrontation in Europe. It was concepts of "spheres of interest" and the "balances of power" that Roosevelt had hoped to put an end to at Yalta. Stalin's realistic thinking was too unstable to him. Roosevelt perceived that within a bi-polar world there might some day be another third world war. At the Yalta Conference Stalin and Roosevelt agreed to free elections in Central Europe, but they did not clearly define "free elections". "Free" certainly meant something different to Stalin than it did to Roosevelt, but both sides knew this. The Americans were still fighting the Japanese in the Pacific, and it might be necessary to enlist the Soviets in the region to defeat the Japanese. Stalin walked away from Yalta believing that whoever occupies the land imposes his own social system.

On July 16, 1945 Truman met with Stalin in Potsdam. Truman went to the meeting primarily concerned with getting the Soviets into the war in the Pacific, but changed his focus when he received a message indicating that the first atomic bomb had been successfully tested. Truman recognized right away that it was unlikely he would need Russian forces to help defeat the Japanese. Instead of bargaining with Stalin he stood up to him on issues of Germany's political and economic future. Stalin had wanted to equally divide war reparations coming from all four sectors of conquered Germany, and indicated that any items already taken from his sector was to be considered war-booty. The U.S. would refuse to allow war reparations coming from outside of the Soviet sector. This initial confrontation between the Soviets and the West marked the beginning of the

Cold War. It might have made a difference in the Cold War if Truman had done two things at the Potsdam Conference; (1) recognize that Russia had legitimate security concerns, and negotiate boundaries of influence in Central Europe, and (2) replace Stalin's demands for war reparations with both an extension of the lend-lease agreement and an agreed upon financial assistance program.

In 1946 in the United States, the political climate was anti-Communist. In March Winston Churchill, while visiting the U.S., made his famous "Iron Curtain" speech (warning that Europe was split with communist totalitarianism on one side and democratic freedom on the other). Churchill encouraged an American-British alliance. In September President Truman received the Clifford-Elsey Report which warned of Soviet expansionism in Europe, and the possibility of war by the Soviets. Truman locked up the report and did not make it public, out of fear that it would negatively impact relations with the Soviets. In November Republicans won the majority in both the Senate and the House of Representatives. Democrats were attacked as being weak on communism. Commerce Secretary Wallace was fired for being a pacifist. The FBI director, J. Edgar Hoover, warned of 100 thousand communist being at large in the United States. While in Europe, Secretary of State Byrnes was negotiating with Stalin and Molotov on a German peace treaty without consulting all the details with President Truman. These details included recognizing Rumanian and Bulgarian regimes, in exchange for a German peace agreement. Truman had earlier been criticized by Republican Congressmen for making concessions with Stalin during the Yalta Conference. Byrnes' secret talks with the Soviets lead to the president replacing him with a new Secretary of State, Dean Acheson.

Under the Truman Doctrine economic aid was given to Greece and Turkey to assist them in post war development. Truman saw the world after WWII as being split. One side based on freedom and the other based on coercion. He believed that countries that had fought for freedom during WWII could now lose their free institutions and independence to Soviet totalitarianism. Acheson warned of, “...(the) spreading corruption and infection”.<sup>5</sup> Truman told Congress that the collapse of free institutions in one state would put at risk the next state, and that eventually the interests of the United States would be threatened. If the U.S. was to have lasting peace, it needed world order (as defined by the U.S.). Both Truman and Acheson believed that the internal affairs of a nation were a key element in developing world order. Truman stated that the United States would support all free peoples against external and internal threats. The Marshall Plan took the Truman Doctrine one step further and offered money to all of Europe in an effort to rebuild their nations. Originally Russia and Eastern Europe were a part of this plan. In June 1947 the Soviets were offered an opportunity to participate in the Marshall Plan, but there were strings attached. Under the plan, the Soviets needed to contribute raw materials to the rebuilding of Europe (including Germany), and to open the economic planning and control of Eastern Europe to the West. It was known even before the plan was offered that the Soviets would not want to participate. This gave the impression that the Soviets excluded themselves. They also did not permit the East European countries to participate. Had the United States made economic concessions to the Soviets in Eastern Europe, it might have been possible to reach an agreement in Germany. The U.S. clearly had greater interests in developing peace in Germany rather than isolating all of Eastern Europe, and did not have to take a hard line against the Soviets. Truman failed to

recognize that Russia, even though having ideological differences with the West, was a sovereign nation with real security needs. Stalin perceived the Marshal Plan, and the requirement for a free market economy, as a threat to the Soviet State.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Donald M. Goldstein, Jay M. Shafritz, & Phil Williams, *Classic Readings of International Relations*, (Orlando, Florida: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1994, p395-402).

<sup>2</sup> Ole R. Holsi, "The Study of International Politics Makes Strange Bedfellows: Theories of the Radical Right and Radical Left," *American Political Science Review* 68, no.1 (March 1874): 217-242.

<sup>3</sup> Louis J. Halle, *The Cold War As History* (New York: Harper and Row, 1967, p121-125).

<sup>4</sup> Donald M. Goldstein, Jay M. Shafritz, & Phil Williams, *Classic Readings of International Relations*, (Orlando, Florida: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1994, p403-411).

<sup>5</sup> James Nathan and James Oliver, *United States Foreign Policy and World Order*, (University of Delaware, Delaware; Harper Collins Publishers, 1989, p55-58).

## **Chapter 3**

### **Containment and Losing the Moral High Ground**

George K. Kennan, head of the Policy Planning Staff of the State Department, in July 1947 in *Foreign Affairs* provided a definition of the new U.S. foreign policy on communist containment. He based the necessity for containment on his conclusion that the Soviets are inherently hostile toward western democracies, largely due to the nature of their communist domestic structure. He went on to say that in order to defeat the Soviets western powers needed to adopt a policy of firm containment against the expansion of communism (this included the use of military might if needed). Kennan also foresaw (with accuracy) the eventual fall of the Soviet system, and that it would come from internal changes. He observed that the Soviet Union had only one political party and had never managed a legitimate transfer of power. The Soviet people were not permitted to participate in their government nor were they allowed to elect their leaders. If communist leadership was to permit the populace to participate in the political process, Kennan foresaw political change as a consequence for the communist party. The fall of the Soviet Union under Mikhail Gorbachev proved Kennan correct. During the Cold War the U.S. picked its allies based on this new containment policy (not on Wilsonianism principals). In a rush to contain communism I wonder if Wilson's original ideas of promoting freedom, liberty, and democracy were lost. Why else would the U.S. prop up



a dictatorship in South Vietnam without free elections or other essentials of a modern democracy? It seemed the U.S. government would do anything to stop the spread of communism, even at the expense of loosing our Wilsonianistic moral high ground.

The National Security document (NSC-68) produced in April 1950, which served as the United States' primary document on cold war strategy, defined the national interests in terms of moral principles. Truman originally shelved NSC-68, because he thought it was too controversial. He later took it off the shelf after the start of the Korean War. Truman described America as a crusader set out on a moral mission to produce an international environment in which free markets and democracy could flourish. This meant stopping the spread of communist totalitarianism. Political idealists, like Woodrow Wilson, had dreamed of creating a general association (league) of nations. Following WWII the United Nations was formed, but this organization was not established to stop communist expansionism. Wilson, in earlier years, had believed it was the role of the United States to promote democracy and freedom throughout the world. Modern day democracy has its base in Christianity and classical liberal thought. Both clash against socialism and communism. Leaders of the West, such as Truman, saw the Soviet Union through Wilsonianism eyes. They were convinced that democracy was morally superior to other forms of government and saw communism as a threat against idealist dreams of world harmony. It would have been better for American leadership to see the world in more realist terms than from an idealistic point of view. Truman should have identified what true U.S. interests were in Europe, and not to try to define world order based on principles of liberal democracy. For example, if Truman had negotiated early with Stalin for recognition of some government regimes in Eastern Europe, it is

possible he could have maintained a whole Germany, with an elected government and a free market system.

Throughout the Cold War state actors used instruments of power (diplomatic, economic, and military) against each other. The United States was fundamentally opposed to communism and communist expansionism. Under NSC-68 this meant protecting the U.S. and its NATO allies from the Soviet threat. As a matter of policy the West attempted to stop Soviet expansionism into third world countries. The United States at times used economic embargoes with the Soviet Union and other communist nations as economic instruments of power. However, the primary instrument of power used by both sides to meet political objectives was a massive buildup of conventional and nuclear weapons. A large U.S. military (to include aircraft carriers, submarines, and long range bombers) had to be built, maintained, and modernized with new technologies. The draft was introduced, and some veterans of WWII were drafted back into the military to fight in Korea. Implementation of the concepts of NSC-68 meant billions of dollars spent by the U.S. on an enlarged military force (military defense was tripled) forward deployed in Europe and the Pacific.

In addition to overseas basing of American forces, different types of nuclear weapons were being developed in increasing numbers. The primary purpose to produce and own nuclear weapons became to deter the other nuclear capable nation from attacking with his nuclear weapons.<sup>1</sup> Deterrence defined the cold war. Even though neither side launched an attack against the other for fear of mutual destruction, they did support third world nations fighting limited conflicts. As both the United States and the Soviet Union lined up on opposite sides of the Cold War, war in third world countries

became war by proxy. This allowed the two super powers to meet on the battlefield without the fear of initiating a total war.<sup>2</sup> The scope of the Cold War did not have to move beyond Europe, but it did largely due to the Western belief in the Domino Theory. Western leaders (such as Truman and Eisenhower) believed that as one country fell to communism it put at risk its neighbor to fall next. Eventually the falling of one nation to the next would put at danger the security of the United States. What they failed to realize was that the Red Tide of communism was not as seamless as they perceived it to be. For example the communist government in Russia was not the same as the communist government in China. In fact the two countries became enemies of each other. Eventually China, who supported Ho Chi Minh in his nationalistic struggle, became an enemy of Vietnam, and fought a border war with them. It wasn't until Nixon was president that the United States started seeing each communist country as separate with unique interests. If American leadership could have seen beyond the Red Scare and McCarthyism, they could have avoided expanding the Cold War outside of Europe. The war internal to Vietnam should have been seen as a nationalistic movement, and not as a continuation of the communist Red Tide spreading across Asia. American national interest may not have been vital enough to justify our involvement.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Dennis Drew and Donald Snow, *Making Strategy: An Introduction to National Security Process and Problems*, (Maxwell AFB, Alabama: Air University Press, August 1988, p123).

<sup>2</sup> Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1984, p149).

## **Chapter 4**

### **Democracy on a Silver Platter**

Would Wilson have involved the U.S. in Vietnam as much as Presidents Kennedy or Johnson had? President Woodrow Wilson did deploy troops to Mexico and later to France during World War I. When Wilson was convinced that the U.S. could no longer be an isolationist, he was careful to point out that the realization of America's role did not imply an extension of her military might. He believed it was America's ideals and character, not the physical power or wealth, that the rest of the world needed.<sup>1</sup> Both Kennedy and Johnson shared (to some degree) Wilson's idealist views and classical liberal thoughts on a community of world order. Wilson had determined that democracy was morally just, and that the United States had a responsibility to promote democracy, freedom, liberty, etc... throughout the world. As a result of the cold war, communist expansionism was seen as the major threat to democracy, and the Soviet Union as the enemy of the United States. With this black and white thinking largely accepted by our government, South Vietnam was given a democratic government by the United States. Whether or not it was a real democratic government wasn't important to Kennedy or Johnson; what mattered was that we stop communism from spreading. In essence what we gave to the people of South Vietnam was a cruel dictatorship and an extension of a

bloody costly civil war. Our intentions were to present them with democracy on-a-silver-platter. istory.

A direct democracy, called a Demokratika, first appeared in ancient Greece approximately 2500 years ago. This was a time before there were nations or states, as we know it. Ancient Athens was one of over a thousand Poleis or city-states. Athens and other Poleis with Demokratika style governments thrived and survived for approximately 300 years. Later the Romans used democratic principles in their government with limited success. The Roman Republic influenced many of the founding fathers of this country. The Roman Republic lasted from 450 BC to 580 AD, and provided modern democracies with examples of republicanism, electoral usage, senate procedures, group representation, veto, and citizenship. If one looks at the entire world history of human kind and these two episodes of democracy, it is obvious that modern democracy has been here only a very short period of time. It would appear to foreigners that our assumption of the American style democracy as being superior to other forms of government is at the least arrogant.

Carl Von Clausewitz, a military theorist, thought that war is an extreme but natural extension of political policy (the ultimate tool of diplomacy). In the course of exercising foreign relations three instruments of power are available to the state; (1) diplomatic, (2) economic, and (3) military. Woodrow Wilson was reluctant to bring the United States into World War I, and he had hoped we would stay neutral. Wilson had planned to use our neutrality, plus both the diplomatic and the economic instruments of power in an effort to bring peace to Europe. Often when neither diplomatic nor economic forces

satisfy national objectives, the military is used (as was the case in World War I). As Clausewitz said, “War is a continuation of policy with other means.”<sup>2</sup>

During the course of the Cold War the world was bi-polar, with western democracies on one side and communist nations on the other. This arrangement pitched one type of ideology against another; the capitalistic United States versus the socialistic Soviet Union. Neither nuclear capable country wanted to face off with the other directly for fear of starting the ultimate war, but rather each nation fought by proxy. The United States opposed communism in both Korea and Vietnam, and the Soviet Union supported communism in Cuba and Nicaragua. The Cold War for the United States was continuation of an anti-communistic expansion policy, and for the Soviet Union was an extension of their anti-capitalistic policy. Woodrow Wilson’s memorable Fourteen Points include ideas that have always attracted liberal thinkers. The first four include the notions of open diplomacy, freedom of the seas, reduction of economic barriers, and limitations of arms. Most importantly was the fourteenth point, which called for the association of nations to ensure political independence and territorial integrity of all nations.<sup>3</sup> The assumption by Wilson and other liberals is that all legitimate forms of government operate on a capitalistic system that would permit free trade between peoples. At the end of World War II negotiations for determining Europe’s future by the Allies were sometimes confrontational between western leaders and Stalin. When some east European nations wanted to participate in the Marshall Plan, Stalin made it clear he would not permit this. Presidential advisor Clark Clifford said, “So long as the Soviet Union maintained it’s ideologically, negotiations were treated as pointless.”<sup>4</sup>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Robert Endicott Osgood, *Ideals and Self-Interest in America's Foreign Relations*, (Chicago, Illinois, The University of Chicago Press; 1965, p156-169).

<sup>2</sup> Colonel John Osgood, "Carl Von Clausewitz and Antoine-Henri Jomini and Military Strategy", *Makers of Modern Strategy; from Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age*, 1986.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Endicott Osgood, *Ideals and Self-Interest in America's Foreign Relations*, (Chicago, Illinois, The University of Chicago Press; 1965, p57-59).

<sup>4</sup> From class notes from American Foreign Policy Class at University of Auburn Montgomery, Oct 26, 1998.

## **Chapter 5**

### **Ike, Kennedy, and Johnson**

President Eisenhower started the American involvement in Vietnam in the early 1950s by aiding the French who were fighting the Viet Minh. This was a period when both red China and the Soviet Union were on friendly terms and perceived by the west as a growing red menace advancing across the face of the Earth. A few years earlier Senator Joe McCarthy had gone on a crusade (witch-hunt) to root out communists in America. Due process and individual rights guaranteed under the Constitution were sacrificed in order that the United States could be safe from communists. Wilson and other classical liberals would have argued that the rights of the individual outweighed the rights of the government. John Locke, father of liberal thought, in his “Treatise of Civil Government” believed individual rights should be maximized against the government. If McCarthy was able to get away with shelving American beliefs and values in the name of defending democracy, then what chance did the citizens of a third world country like Vietnam stand. It was clear that nothing was going to stand in the way of communist containment. Eisenhower defended his support of French troops in Vietnam by explaining his domino theory of communist expansion. Underlying the communist threat was the realization that the oceans of the Pacific and Atlantic could no longer insure the



safety of the United States. After all ten years earlier Japan had attacked American soil and almost wiped out the pacific fleet.

Right from the beginning the United States was involved in creating the Republic of South Vietnam and providing the country with a President. U.S. foreign policy was not concerned with establishing liberal freedoms, but with containing communism (by securing South Vietnam as free and independent). The gift of democracy presented to the people of South Vietnam was in reality a corrupt dictatorship with little respect for human rights. When the French failed to beat the Viet Minh, they agreed with the communist to divide Vietnam along the 17<sup>th</sup> parallel. Ho Chi Minh and the French also agreed to hold elections within two years to unify Vietnam. South Vietnam's President Ngo Dinh Diem assumed that Ho would win a popular election and declined to abide by the earlier agreement to hold elections. The U.S., more concerned with containment than ensuring democracy, backed Diem's position. The U.S. also helped establish the Southeast Asian Treaty Organization (SEATO) that linked democratic Asian nations into an economic and militaristic alliance. But more importantly SEATO helped give recognition to South Vietnam as a legitimate nation. The fact that Diem was a corrupt dictator with little popularity among his own people, rather than an elected leader of a legitimate democracy didn't go unnoticed by President Kennedy. But rather than enforce national elections as had been agreed to in the French/Ho Chi Minh armistice and risk loosing South Vietnam to the communist, Kennedy secretly allowed the CIA to plot the murder of Diem in a U.S. backed military coup. However killing and replacing the dictator with another didn't make fighting the communist any easier. On the contrary,

Diem's death unleashed a series of coups that made South Vietnam even more unstable and encouraged the communist to escalate the war.

A secondary political goal for our involvement in South Vietnam was to project an international image of the United States as a faithful ally of free peoples. Some could argue this was more important to American foreign policy than securing an independent South Vietnam. President Johnson said, "We are there because we have a promise to keep ... We are also there to strengthen the world order. Around the globe from Berlin to Thailand are the people whose well-being rests ... on the belief that they can count on us".<sup>1</sup> The CIA's involvement in communist containment didn't start with Diem's assassination. After WWII, with the announcement of containment as a national policy came the creation of the CIA. Their first assignment was to influence the Italian elections, and to ensure that the Christian Democrats won over the socialist party. This was done by passing out bags of money to candidates of the Christian Democrat party to help fund their campaign. In addition, both the Vatican and the CIA let it be known that communist were atheist, leading the large majority of Catholics living in Italy to believe that they would have their freedom of religion put at risk if the communist did win. The tactic worked and the communists were kept out of the Italian government. Eisenhower and future presidents saw covert action as an effective political tool that brought results with a cheap price tag. When South Vietnam split from North Vietnam after the French signed an armistice, the CIA distributed information in the north intended to identify Ho Chi Minh and the communist with atheism. The intent was to scare Catholics living in the north to move to the south ... it worked. Brochures with slogans like 'Christ has gone south' or "Jesus no longer lives here" had the scare effect that the CIA was hoping for.

Even though this was suppose to undermined Ho Chi Minh's northern government, it didn't. In fact what the mass exodus of Catholic families did was to provide more elbowroom for the folks who stayed behind in North Vietnam.

Later as the war progressed the CIA got more involved in conducting covert operations in Vietnam. CIA operations seemed to grow in size and cost, and when they expanded to include groups from other agency mistakes became more common. With increased involvement of the CIA came unwanted publicity and awareness by the public of their actions. None of these tactics used by the CIA reflected credit upon the U.S. as a beacon of democracy and freedom. I think in the end Woodrow Wilson would have agreed that the ways which we fight aggression are important, but that the reason is more important. Wilson would have been more concerned with security of the United States and the protection of the rights. Wilson said in an address in May 1911, "there are times in the history of nations when they must take up the instrument of bloodshed in order to vindicate spiritual conceptions. For liberty is a spiritual conception, and when men take up arms to set other men free, there is something sacred and holy in the warfare. I will not cry peace so long as there is sin and wrong in the world." <sup>3</sup>

Diem's successors were nothing more than military dictators who had no intention of allowing fair democratic elections. They were unpopular and they knew it. In 1964 alone there were seven coups of the South Vietnamese government. As each dictatorship took power, the U.S. took on more responsibility for fighting the Vietcong. In the north Communist leaders wanted to take advantage of the situation. The Communist Party Central Committee meeting in Hanoi in December 1963 set plans to beef up guerilla units along the border and start infiltration operations into the South.<sup>4</sup>

After Kennedy's death, President Johnson had to deal with communist containment. In Vietnam, Johnson faced two choices; (1) continue to escalate the conflict by supplying weapons and soldiers, or (2) withdraw support and allow for the collapse of South Vietnam. Johnson had a greater fear of abandoning the undemocratic Saigon government than of participating in the war. The U.S. national strategy became; to demonstrate to North Vietnam (without triggering Chinese intervention) that it would not be permitted to take over South Vietnam and that its only choice was to negotiate for peace.

Johnson's involvement in every level of the Vietnam conflict made it impossible for the U.S. military to win. He did not want to expand the war to other areas of Indochina, even though the Vietcong ran supplies through Laos. Johnson made countless restrictions on bombing targets that prevented airpower from denying the enemy logistics and manpower. The White House would often choose the bombing targets for the Air Force, which meant that by the time the attack order was executed the target had been moved to a new location. As American involvement escalated in the 1960s, the military turned to search and destroy tactics that attempted to wear down the guerrillas. Washington was trying to prove that aggression does not pay, but underestimated the will of the Vietcong to fight.

What Johnson failed to realize was that more Vietnamese were more prepared to die for their cause than Americans soldiers had been. Ho Chi Minh had been fighting for thirty years in an effort to nationalize all of Vietnam, and he wasn't about to stop for the Americans. Johnson failed to realize this and thought a demonstration of moderation, to reassure Hanoi, would lead to compromise. Washington made several attempts to seek peace with North Vietnam, and each time Johnson would stop fighting or bombing just

prior to talks with the North. His olive branch to the communist did not provide the results he expected. In fact, when the bombings stopped the Vietcong would use the time to rebuild their war-damaged infrastructure. Also the communist leadership saw Johnson's style of "stop-the-bombings ...then-negotiate" as a sign of weakness.

In 1968 North Vietnam (Vietcong) launched an all out surprise offensive against the South on a traditional New Year holiday (TET). Even though the forces of the South successfully defended their positions and won the battle, the fighting was seen by most Americans at home as too intense. Just prior to TET, Johnson and McNamara had lead the public into believing the war was coming to an end (and we were winning). When the fighting from the TET offensive was broadcast via television to the U.S., it brought the horror of war into the living room. Our involvement in the Vietnam War became questionable by the average American citizen. Demonstrations and riots by war protestors started to intensify in the U.S. Shortly after TET, Johnson announced his decision not to run for a second term.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> James Nathan and James Oliver, *United States Foreign Policy and World Order*, (University of Delaware, Delaware; Harper Collins Publishers, 1989, p278-283).

<sup>3</sup> Robert Endicott Osgood, *Ideals and Self-Interest in America's Foreign Relations*, (Chicago, Illinois, The University of Chicago Press; 1965, P307-312).

<sup>4</sup> Henry Kissinger, *Diplomacy*, (New York: Touchstone, 1994, p639-652).

Not only were civilians back home in the U.S. wondering what we were doing in Vietnam, but also the soldier was asking the same questions. Several factors were taking a toll on the morale of the American troops fighting in the jungles off Vietnam. As the war dragged on in Vietnam, fragging became a real problem in the U.S. Army. Fragging was when the enlisted members of a unit no longer wanted to follow their officer, and they decided to kill him. In 1969 there were 96 known cases of fragging, and in 1971 there was 200 cases. The total number of cases documented during the war was 1000. The enlisted soldiers participating in the fragging did not kill their officer without prior warning. A typical scenario started with popping a smoke grenade into the officers tent as a warning. If the officer did not heed the warning, then at another time a hand grenade with the pin still installed was tossed in the tent as a second warning. The next step was for the troops to toss a live grenade into the officer's tent.

In addition to fragging, combat refusal became more common. In October 1971, the First Calvary refused to set up a fire base 400 yards outside of the camp perimeter. Also, war crimes by American soldiers against the peoples of South Vietnam started to occur. In March 1968 in My Lai 400 unarmed civilians were killed on orders from an Army 1<sup>st</sup> Lieutenant, who was taking revenge on the village for supporting the Vietcong. Drug use by American soldiers became an increasing problem during the war (especially since all types of drugs were available and cheap). In 1970 heroin became a popular addictive drug among GIs. Marijuana was used by greater than 50% of U.S. soldiers. U.S. military policy in South Vietnam promoted sloppy, dishonest, and immoral behavior from American GIs. The troops stopped believing in the fight against the communist rebels. American soldiers no longer saw the Vietnam War as a legitimate war. All this

lead to a decay in the American fighting capability (the military force was becoming hollow). After 1970 President Nixon and his Secretary of State, Henry Kissinger, perceived one reason to pull the United States out of Vietnam was to save the American fighting force.

## **Chapter 6**

### **Nixon's Withdrawal**

The Nixon Doctrine was a way of keeping U.S. commitments at reduced risks. This notion was very similar to Woodrow Wilson's concept of spreading democracy in the world without having to pay for it. This required that Nixon and Kissinger see U.S. involvement in world politics in reference to state's interests (the interest of the United States). Nixon's plan to end the war had five elements; (1) disarm student protestors and critics by harassing them, tapping their phones, investigating them with the FBI, and keeping them busy in court, (2) disarm the most volatile issues ... draw down troops in Vietnam and eliminate the draft, (3) hand over the war to the South Vietnamese, even though the North Vietnamese had older more seasoned regular soldiers, (4) augment peace talks with bombings of North Vietnam (increase use of the B52), and (5) widen the geography of the war to include Laos and Cambodia (this was done in secret). Nixon had hoped that South Vietnam could keep the North out of its country for at least his presidency.

President Nixon equated "peace with honor" to an American withdrawal that did not abandon the South to an imminent Communist take over. Thus an end to the war and a complete American departure became the primary political objectives. Unlike Johnson, Nixon was willing to use any conventional force necessary to bring Ho Chi Minh to the



peace table. After Nixon entered office, he initiated a slow withdrawal of American forces from South Vietnam. During this withdrawal the communist unleashed a three-prong attack across the DMZ. Nixon intended to keep the withdrawal of ground forces on schedule, and developed an air response (Linebacker bombing campaign). Nixon employed air power in support of very limited objectives—only to guarantee America’s continued withdrawal and to assure that the South did not face imminent collapse after the US departure.<sup>1</sup> The air attacks compelled Hanoi to return to the bargaining table. Nixon felt comfortable in expanding Linebacker as needed during peace talks without fear of Chinese or Soviet involvement. Both nations were more concerned with détente than with expanding the Vietnam War. By 1973 China and the Soviet Union had broken off relations with each other, and the White House was conducting SALT I talks with the Kremlin. Riots and demonstrations against U.S. involvement in South Vietnam spilled over from college campuses to Main Street. Americans no longer had the resolve to continue fighting in a war with a questionable cause. Successful trips to China and USSR provided public support in the U.S. for an offensive campaign and a quick end to American involvement in Vietnam. Linebacker I and Linebacker II were intended to destroy North Vietnam’s will to fight while demonstrating that America would remain committed to South Vietnam’s independence.<sup>2</sup> Civilian and military leaders viewed Linebacker I and II as successful, because the U.S. did finally reach an agreement with North Vietnam to halt the fighting, permit an honorable withdrawal of American military forces, and provided for the return of POWs. The North Vietnamese agreed to a cease-fire in which they would be permitted to remain in place (military forces of the North did not have to pull back).

Looking back on U.S. involvement in Vietnam, I wonder if there could have been an alternative to Diem as the leader of South Vietnam. Diem was a Catholic (a minority religion in Vietnam), and unsympathetic to the Buddhist. Diem attempted to contain or destroy any group that opposed him. He saw Buddhist followers as opponents to his regime, and he closed all Buddhist temples in an effort to keep religious group members from meeting.<sup>3</sup> The alternative to replacing Diem would have been to find a better candidate or allow all of Vietnam to hold national elections (in which case Ho Chi Minh would have been elected). But if Ho Chi Minh was permitted to win in a free election and to become leader of all Vietnam, would this create a domino effect in Indochina (or even further into the rest of Asia)? There is some truth to the Domino Theory ... natural events do occur as a consequence of a previous event. If Vietnam did fall in the early part of the 1960s, and then later all of Indochina, then this would validate a portion of the Domino Theory. However it is unlikely that Indo-Chinese Communism would threaten the rest of Asia. I believe communism would have gone as far as the Thailand border and stopped. Control of the Vietnamese people by Ho Chi Minh is no worse than control by the dictator Diem. The question that should have been asked by the American administration should have been "What is in the best interest of the United States ...or ... Where should the U.S. place it's limited resources in the world to have the greatest effect on national interests?" If Vietnam and Indochina fell to communism ... so what? The impact to the security interests of the United States is minimal. By over extending the use of our military in Indochina as an instrument of our foreign policy, the United States suffered great losses (in the number of people killed or wounded, social unrest, billions of

dollars spent, etc...). It would have been better allow Ho Chi Minh to nationalize his country, and then to work with him in an effort to open his markets to free trade.

During the course of the Vietnam War Presidents Kennedy and Johnson both were concerned with what our European allies might think, if the U.S. pulled out of Vietnam and left South Vietnam to fight on their own. The reality was that our allies didn't want us in the Vietnam War, because it took potential resources (and our attention) away from the European Theater. Nixon's foreign strategy was to take a normal tone of diplomacy with the Soviet Union, and to use détente. This gave legitimacy to the Soviets, made them responsible for spheres of influence, and treated them like a world power. Nixon's strategies also included the use of Henry Kissinger, the CIA, and the FBI as his primary means of developing foreign policy. He did not understand the need for Congressional involvement (he didn't trust them). Nor did he trust career diplomats at the State Department (much of Nixon's foreign policy making was done in secret). As a result of not using the legislative process, initial START attempts by Nixon with the Soviets failed. Nixon should not have been so secretive about foreign politics, and should have included both the State Department and Congress in his efforts to develop American foreign policy.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> George Osburn, Asa Clark, Daniel Kaufman, and Douglas Lute, *Democracy, Strategy, and Vietnam; Implications for American Policymaking*, (Toronto: Lexington Books, 1987, p218-229).

<sup>2</sup> George Osburn, Asa Clark, Daniel Kaufman, and Douglas Lute, *Democracy, Strategy, and Vietnam; Implications for American Policymaking*, (Toronto: Lexington Books, 1987, p255).

<sup>3</sup> From class notes from American Foreign Policy Class at University of Auburn Montgomery, Sep 16, 1998.

## Chapter 7

### Summary and Conclusions

The communist containment policy, created at the start of the cold war, combined with elements of Wilsonianism, is the primary cause of the U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War. John Locke in his *Treatise of Civic Government* of 1689 was the first to discuss liberal ideas. Concepts of liberal democracy in the U.S. included the need for free markets, limited government, representation by elected officials, and individual rights. President Wilson saw democracy as morally just, and that the United States had a responsibility to promote democracy, freedom, and individual rights to the world. Following WWII, communist expansionism was seen as the major threat to democracy. President Truman in his State of the Union message of January 8, 1951 said, “Our men are fighting (in Korea) because they know, as we do, that the aggression in Korea is part of an attempt of the Russian communist dictatorship to take over the world, step by step.”<sup>1</sup> NSC-68 served as the United States’ primary document on cold war strategy. It defined our national interests in terms of moral principles, established the role of the U.S. as a crusader against communist expansionism, and set a goal of creating an international environment in which free markets and democracy could flourish. This meant stopping the spread of communist ideology. In an effort to stop communist expansion into Southeast Asia, the U.S. gave the people of South Vietnam what appeared to be a

Democratic Republic. Our intentions were to present them with democracy on-a-silver-platter. In reality it was a corrupt dictatorship, and free elections were never permitted to take place.

What Wilson (and later Kennedy and Johnson) failed to recognize is that western ideas of individualism, liberalism, constitutionalism, equality, liberty, the rule of law, democracy, free markets, separation of church and state, often have little resonance in Confucian, Buddhist, or Orthodox cultures. Western concepts differ fundamentally from those prevalent in other civilizations. The notion that there could be a universal civilization is a western idea, directly at odds with the particularism of most Asian societies and their emphasis on what distinguishes one people from another.<sup>2</sup> Often the values that are most important to the West are least important worldwide.<sup>3</sup> American foreign policy during the Cold War in effect was using military power to run the world in ways that promoted Western economic and political values (Wilsonian concepts).

It is ironic that the author of the “X” Paper, who first coined “containment”, did not agree with the U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War, nor did he think that massive bombing (conventional and nuclear) could be an effective political tool meant to forward American foreign policy. In 1966 George Kennan wrote in a letter about the air bombing campaign over North Vietnam that “weapons of mass destruction, as we are now beginning to see in a very small way in Vietnam, are simply not a rational weapon for the exertion of power and influence internationally where the task of power is to affect the behavior of people and governments, not destroy them”.<sup>4</sup> It was Kennan’s belief that military firepower did not necessarily equal political power, that bombs did not always translate into control, and that conventional mass bombings like those in Vietnam were

doomed to failure.<sup>5</sup> As the Vietnam War dragged on and our involvement was slowly escalated by Johnson, the American people grew dissatisfied. On college campuses hundreds of thousands of students demonstrated on a regular basis against American foreign policy in Southeast Asia. Secretary of Defense McNamara returned from Vietnam in 1966 with reports that victory for the U.S. was right around the corner. But instead we got the TET offensive and continued fighting.

Starting in 1966 Congress began to question the President's foreign policy decisions. Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman Fulbright said, "(the North Vietnamese) are primitive poor people who have been fighting for twenty years and I don't understand myself why they continue to fight, but they do."<sup>6</sup> George Kennan, former Army general James Gavin, and realist professor Hans Morgenthau, all agreed with Senator Fulbright that the U.S. was wrongly engaged in Vietnam, and that the war was unwinnable. Fulbright in 1966 denounced the "arrogance of power" of American diplomacy since WWII.<sup>7</sup> Johnson's foreign policy was not concerned with establishing liberal freedoms in Vietnam, but with containing communism. I believe Wilson's original concepts of democracy and freedom were lost on the Johnson administration, who were more concerned about containment of communist expansionism in Southeast Asia. It became a situation in which your-enemy-is-my-enemy, regardless of how you are representing your people. This foreign policy continued even after the pull out of American forces from Vietnam. President Reagan supported multiple cruel dictatorships in South America, despite public knowledge of widespread human right violations, in order to keep communism in check. Wilsonianism by itself is a noble notion that even today generates widespread support by democratic and liberal thinkers. It is important that the U.S. does

not force our perception of democracy onto the peoples of a nation that we have little understanding of.

One of the biggest lessons learned out of the Vietnam War was to not fight for an ally who wasn't willing to fight for himself. As the U.S. put more money and more troops into South Vietnam to fight their conflict, the government of the South became more dependent on the American military to defend its sovereignty. President Diem and the rest of South Vietnam's dictators assumed that the more the U.S. invested into the country, the more committed they become to maintaining a presence in Vietnam. Containment of China and the Soviet Union by support of weak regimes was a mistake (they need to be self-supporting). What Kissinger and Nixon understood was that each state's interest stands on its own value and worth. They didn't see the Red Tide sweeping across Asia and the Pacific. They saw that the U.S. interest in Europe was more important than our interest in South Vietnam. If Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam fell to the communist it would be of little interest to the U.S., as compared to our greater interest in Germany (or the fall of Europe). It was this notion of state's interests that permitted Nixon and Kissinger with enough diplomatic room to negotiate with North Vietnam.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Department of State, *Bulletin*, January 22, 1951, p123.

<sup>2</sup> Harry C. Triandis, *The New York Times*, 25 Dec 90, p41.

<sup>3</sup> Harry C. Triandis, "Cross-Cultural Studies of Individualism and Collectivism," Nebraska Symposium on Motivation, vol. 37, 1989, 41-133.

<sup>4</sup> George Kennan, *George F. Kennan Papers*, Princeton University, Princeton, N.J., 1966.

<sup>5</sup> Joel H. Rosenthal, *Righteous Realists*, Louisiana State University Press, Baton Rouge, LA, 1991, p71.

### Notes

<sup>6</sup> Robert Schulzinger, *American Diplomacy in the Twentieth Century*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), p279.

<sup>7</sup> Robert Schulzinger, *American Diplomacy in the Twentieth Century*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), p280.



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